

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC)
Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)
Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP)

Wetlands Reserve Enhancement Program (WREP)
Fiscal Year 2006 Announcement of Program Funding

Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance (CFDA) number: 10.072.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Wetlands Reserve Enhancement Program (WREP) is administered under the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) and uses existing authority to enhance the delivery of WRP.

Specifically, WREP provides an avenue for the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to form special partnerships with others to improve or expand the delivery of WRP, including, but not limited to, easement acquisition and activities associated with wetland restoration, creation, or enhancement. Additionally, NRCS may use WREP to obtain assistance with easement management activities from those who have the appropriate expertise, as determined by the Chief of NRCS.

For Federal fiscal year (FY) 2006, NRCS, on behalf of the Commodity Credit Corporation, is making \$9.5 million in financial assistance available for WREP partnership proposals: 1) that address wetland creation and enhancement efforts on easements enrolled in prior years; 2) where partners will contribute significantly to WRP technical assistance costs; and 3) that provide assistance with managing easement projects. NRCS estimates the reserved funds, along with contributions from partners, which may result in addressing wetland restoration, creation, enhancement, and easement management on approximately 5,000 acres.

PROPOSAL DUE DATES AND ADDRESSES: Proposals are to be submitted in hard copy format, either by hand delivery, express mail or overnight courier service. Proposals will be submitted to the NRCS State Conservationist for the State where the project land resides. Proposals must be received at the appropriate NRCS State Office, as shown in the Appendix to this announcement, by close of business on March 28, 2006. A proposal's postmark date is not a factor in whether an application is received on time. The applicant assumes the risk of any delays in proposal delivery.

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I. FUNDING OPPORTUNITY DESCRIPTION

A. Legislative Authority

Food, Agriculture, Conservation and Trade Act of 1990, Title XIV, Section 1237, P.L. 101-624 stst. 3584, 7 U.S.C. 3837, as amended.

16 U.S.C. 3837a – f, 7 CFR Part 1467

B. Background

The Secretary of Agriculture delegated to NRCS the authority to administer WRP in 1994 as part of Department Reorganization. Partners are a significant contributor to achieving the various phases of program delivery. To acknowledge this contribution, NRCS wishes to recognize this accomplishment with a unique label.

The Chief of NRCS, supports developing competitive processes that direct funding to locally initiated and led projects that achieve maximum environmental benefits while remaining cost-effective. Therefore, the Agency is providing an opportunity for those interested in wetland restoration and protection to compete for funding for partnership efforts that are determined mutually desirable by the NRCS State Conservationist and the potential partner.

NRCS initiated the Wetlands Reserve Enhancement Program (WREP) pilot effort in FY 2004 by authorizing a WREP project area in Nebraska and multiple areas in Minnesota. In FY 2005, NRCS awarded nearly \$4.2 million to nine separate partnership efforts in seven States. The WREP funds will be matched by almost \$15.5 million in contributions from a variety of partners. The FY 2005 WREP partnerships will help with restoration and management activities on 29,360 acres while also reducing agency costs by as much as \$3,700 per acre in some areas.

WREP does not alter the nature of WRP. The emphasis of WREP is restoring and protecting habitat for migratory birds and other wetland-dependent wildlife. Landowners will continue to have the opportunity to enroll land under a permanent easement, 30-year easement, or restoration cost-share agreements. However, a WREP proposal may provide for emphasizing one enrollment type or another, such as increasing the utilization of 30-year WRP easements in a particular watershed by the partner purchasing a permanent easement overlay to the 30-year WRP easement and the landowner receiving full compensation from the combined acquisition.

Wetland restoration, creation, and enhancement actions will continue to be designed to maximize wildlife habitat values according to the WRP regulation, 7 CFR Part 1467, and NRCS standards and specifications. Proposals related to easement management must conform to the WRP guidelines for managing lands subject to a WRP easement. NRCS is interested in expanding the WREP implementation effort, and is therefore making the opportunity to participate in WREP available nationwide.

C. Overview

In FY 2006, the purpose of WREP is to stimulate the development of partnerships that serve to lower Agency program delivery costs. NRCS will accept proposals for single- or multiyear projects, not to exceed 3 years, from eligible entities including Federally-recognized Indian tribes, State and local governments, and non-governmental organizations and individuals. However, for multiyear proposals, NRCS will only obligate its own financial and technical assistance funds towards a selected project the first year. Requests for NRCS financial and technical assistance funds for future years will need to compete in future WREP sign-ups. If the proposal does not receive future year funding, all work completed with the first year approval must stand on its own.

Proposals for longer durations will receive a lower priority than those for short-term durations. Proposals where a partner with the necessary expertise, as determined by NRCS, is contributing the majority of the technical assistance to meet the objectives of the partnership will receive higher priority.

Proposals are solicited for multiple-program operations, wetland creation and enhancement on projects enrolled in WRP prior to FY 2006, easement management, and proposals that provide for technical assistance contributions from partners. Proposals are accepted from all 50 States, the Caribbean Area (Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands), and the Pacific Basin Area (Guam, American Samoa, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands).

NRCS State Conservationists will submit the top two priority proposals based on State natural resource concerns and technical assistance needs. Submissions to NRCS' National Headquarters must be accompanied by a letter of recommendation from the appropriate NRCS State Conservationist(s). Complete proposals will be evaluated by a Review Board, established by the Chief, NRCS, which includes the following Agency personnel: representatives from the Easement Programs Division, Ecological Sciences Division, and the Resource Inventory and Analysis Division. Proposals will be scored based on the Criteria for Proposal Evaluation identified in this RFP. Scored proposals will be forwarded to the Chief, NRCS, with recommendations for project approval. The Chief, NRCS, will announce the selected proposals.

Those selected to participate in WREP will enter into a WREP contribution agreement with the NRCS State Conservationist. The WREP contribution agreement will specify the schedule, budget, reporting requirements, and related requirements for use of WREP funds. The State Conservationist will be signatory to the WREP contribution agreement on behalf of NRCS.

II. FUNDING INFORMATION

A. Funds Availability

Effective on the publication date of this notice, NRCS announces the availability of up to \$9.5 million in financial assistance, for WREP activities, until September 30, 2006.

Funds will be available through a nationwide competitive process. In making its selections, NRCS will emphasize proposals that provide for significant levels of technical assistance provided by a partner. The proposals may address WRP program delivery; wetland restoration, creation, and enhancement activities; easement management; or a combination of these activities.

B. Funding Restrictions

The indirect costs for awards may not exceed 15 percent of the total Federal funds provided under each award. Awardees may not use un-recovered indirect costs as part of their matching funds.

Federal funds may not be used to pay any of the following costs unless otherwise permitted by law, or approved in writing by the Authorized Departmental Officer in advance of incurring such costs:

- a. Costs above the amount of funds authorized for the project;
- b. Costs incurred prior to the effective date of the grant;
- c. Costs which lie outside the scope of the approved project and any amendments thereto;
- d. Entertainment costs, regardless of their apparent relationship to project objectives;
- e. Compensation for injuries to persons, or damage to property arising out of project activities;
- f. Consulting services performed by a Federal employee during official duty hours when such consulting services result in the payment of additional compensation to the employee; and,
- g. Renovation or refurbishment of research or related spaces; the purchase or installation of fixed equipment in such spaces; and the planning, repair, rehabilitation, acquisition, or construction of buildings or facilities.

This list is not exhaustive. Questions regarding the allowances of particular items of costs should be directed to the contact person listed in .

III. PROPOSAL INFORMATION

A. Submitting Proposals

Proposals will be submitted to the NRCS State Conservationist for the State where the project land resides. Proposals must be received at the appropriate NRCS State Office, as shown in the Appendix to this announcement, by close of business on March 28, 2006.

The NRCS State Conservationist will prioritize proposals, with input from the State Technical Committee, according to the factors in this Notice, Part IV Criteria for Proposal Evaluation, Section A, State Level Criteria. If more than two proposals are received by the State Conservationist, the top two priority proposals will be submitted to the Chief, NRCS, for consideration.

The Chief, NRCS, with input from the Review Board, will make final national selections from these proposals according to the factors in this Notice, Part IV Criteria for Proposal Evaluation, Section B, State Level Criteria.

B. Definitions

In addition to the definitions found in 7 CFR Part 1467 pertaining to WRP, the following definitions shall be applicable to this Notice:

Contribution agreement means the legal instrument entered into under the authority of 7 U.S.C. 6962a.

Project management means taking certain action to ensure that full wetland functions and values, as required by the WRP easement, are achieved and maintained, as well as conducting certain administrative actions to ensure that the integrity of the easement is maintained.

Wetland creation means the establishment of wetland conditions through manipulation of the physical, chemical, or biological characteristics present to develop a wetland that did not previously exist on an upland or deepwater site.

Wetland enhancement means the manipulation of the physical, chemical, or biological characteristics of a wetland site to heighten, intensify, and improve specific function(s), or to change the growth stage or composition of the vegetation.

C. Proposal Requirements

For a WREP proposal to be considered, it must include:

1. A description of how the project enhances the Agency's efforts to either create or enhance wetlands on projects enrolled in prior years, considering the Agency's goal to maximize wetland functions and values and emphasizing habitat for migratory birds and other wetland-dependent species.

2. A thorough description of how WREP will be implemented with a schedule for implementation, along with the location and size of project area, and the following:

- a. For proposals related to administrative program delivery activities, include the specific tasks to be performed by the partner and NRCS, as well as the scope of the proposal in terms of acres and contracts that will be addressed.

b. For proposals related to creation and enhancement activities, include information on the credentials for those contributing technical resources and the types of creation and enhancement activities that will be performed. Identify whether there is a target species or habitat. Include a schedule for implementation.

c. For proposals to manage WRP-enrolled easement acres, include the number of projects and acres to be managed, information about the management strategy for the targeted habitat, and the credentials related to wetland habitat management for those identified to perform the work.

3. A description of anticipated staffing needs and a detailed description regarding partner contributions. Identify both technical and financial resources that will be provided by each partner. Give a detailed description of how the project will be organized and managed. Include a list of key project personnel, their relevant education or experience, and their anticipated contributions to the project. Explain the level of participation required in the project by government and non-government entities. Identify who will participate in monitoring and evaluating the project.

4. A schedule of requested WRP funding needs on an annual basis and for the life of the agreement.

IV. CRITERIA FOR PROPOSAL EVALUATION

A. State Level Criteria

All proposals will be evaluated based on the determination of the NRCS State Conservationist, with input from the State Technical Committee, that:

1. Acceptance of the proposal will accomplish a WRP activity that otherwise would not be accomplished given the State WRP allocation in FY 2006. For example, the proposal would enable the State to create and enhance more acres in FY 2007 than would otherwise be addressed; the proposal would expedite WRP easement closings by several months; or necessary management activities under WRP would not take place but for the acceptance of the proposal.
2. The potential partner has the necessary technical expertise and resources to perform the tasks identified in the proposal.
3. The potential partner(s) are contributing 50 percent or more of the technical assistance costs.

The highest ranking will be provided to the proposal that addresses the most significant wetland habitat resource concern and contributes the greatest level of technical assistance.

B. National Level Criteria

The review board will rank the State-submitted proposals based upon:

1. The level of technical assistance contribution by partners, including the duration of the potential partnership arrangement;
2. The scope of the proposal referring to the number of acres and projects that will be addressed;
3. The focus of the habitat restoration and management. Greater consideration will be provided to proposals that address at-risk species;
4. The use or demonstration of innovative technology or methods that can be incorporated into NRCS nation-wide activities in the future that would reduce the technical assistance costs of easement monitoring and management.
5. The NRCS State Office's ability to perform the task in the absence of the partnership; and
6. Other considerations determined appropriate by the Chief, NRCS.

V. APPLICATION AND SUBMISSION INFORMATION

A. Application Content and Format

Proposals must contain the information set forth below in order to receive consideration. Applicants should not assume prior knowledge on the part of NRCS as to the relative merits of the project described in the application. Applications must contain all the information required below; however, no standard forms are required.

Applications must be submitted to the appropriate State Conservationist in the following format:

1. Project Abstract: Each proposal must contain a summary of not more than one page that provides the following:
 - a. Project title;
 - b. Project duration (beginning and ending dates);
 - c. Name, address, telephone, e-mail, and other contact information for the project director (please provide a mailing address, not a Post Office Box);
 - d. Names and affiliations of project collaborators;
 - e. Estimated number of projects and acres to be addressed by the proposal;

- f. Project objectives;
- g. Summary of the work to be performed;
- h. Total project cost;
- i. Total Federal share of the total project; and
- j. Total partner contribution in terms of financial and technical assistance.

2. Information required in “Proposal Requirements” above.

B. Submission Requirements

Proposals must include all required forms and narrative sections described in this Notice; incomplete applications will not be considered. If submitting proposals for more than one project, submit a separate, complete application package for each project. Applications are to be typewritten on 8½” x 11” white paper, double spaced, and on one side only. The text of the proposal must be typewritten in a font no smaller than 12-point, with one-inch margins. Applicants must submit one signed original and six complete copies of each project application. Each copy of the proposal must be stapled securely in the upper left hand corner. Hard copies must be accompanied by an electronic copy on a 3½-inch diskette or compact disc. Electronic files must be either Microsoft Word or Acrobat (PDF) files.

C. Proposal Due Date

Proposals must be received at the previously aforementioned address by 5:00 p.m. EDT on March 28, 2006. A proposal’s postmark date is not a factor in whether an application is received on time. The applicant assumes the risk of any delays in proposal delivery.

D. Acknowledgement of Submission

Receipt of all applications will be acknowledged by e-mail. Therefore, applicants are strongly encouraged to provide accurate e-mail addresses. If the applicant’s e-mail address is not indicated, NRCS will acknowledge receipt of the application by letter. If the applicant does not receive an acknowledgment within 60 days of the submission deadline, please contact the appropriate NRCS State office.

VI. AWARD INFORMATION AND ADMINISTRATION

A. Proposal Review and Selection Process

Prior to proposal review, the NRCS State Office will screen each application for its completeness. Incomplete applications, including those that do not meet eligibility requirements, will be eliminated from competition, and notification of elimination will be e-mailed or mailed to the applicant.

Applications meeting the requirements of this Notice will be scored by a Review Board utilizing the Criteria for Proposal Evaluation identified above. Scored applications will be forwarded to the Chief, NRCS, along with a letter identifying the priority for selection. Proposals that have been selected will be notified by mail within 10 business days of the final selection. Applicants whose proposals have not been selected will be notified within 15 business days of the final selection.

B. Anticipated Announcement and Award Dates

Awards are anticipated to be announced on April 20, 2006.

C. Award Notification

Applicants who have been selected will be notified by official notice from NRCS's National Headquarters. The official notice signed by the authorizing official indicates that awardees may proceed to negotiate the contribution agreement with the appropriate NRCS State Conservationist. Applicants whose proposals have not been selected will be notified by official letter.

D. Contribution Agreement

Upon notice of selection for WREP funding, the appropriate NRCS State Conservationist and selected partner will enter into a contribution agreement. The contribution agreement will identify the amount of WREP and partner funds obligated to the project, the project deliverables, the respective timeline and budget, reporting requirements, and other related requirements.

VII. AGENCY CONTACTS

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Appendix
Natural Resources Conservation Service State Conservationists

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